CITY & REGION

EPA Probes Old S. Phila. Distillery

By RAMONA SMITH
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EPA investigators are working their way across the 37-acre former Publicker Industries distillery in South Philadelphia in search of chemicals that might pose a continuing danger of fire, explosion or pollution.

"There's a history of things happening there that are a concern," said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency spokeswoman Ann Cardinal, noting a five-alarm fire that ripped through the old terminal on the Delaware River waterfront last month and an explosion that killed two demolition workers there last year.

The EPA got involved after city fire officials pointed out bulging barrels at the scene of the June 26 fire.

After giving Publicker two weeks to launch its own investigation, the EPA moved in under the federal Superfund program that deals with potential hazardous waste sites.

"There was a sense that we couldn't wait forever," Cardinal said, adding that the firm had used solvents and other potentially hazardous chemicals in its processes.

Although the Connecticut-based Publicker sold the complex in April 1986, its responsibility for the property continues under the Superfund law. Local and corporate spokesmen for the company could not be reached for comment.

Workers in throwaway suits, boots and hardhats moved onto the site yesterday morning, taking samples from every open container and pool on the ground. "We're inventorying what we see," said Cardinal.

The intense heat slowed the work, which has been suspended in the hottest hours of the day. Workers returned to the site late yesterday and were to resume sampling today.

"We're doing no cleanup," said Cardinal. "It's an investigation."

The site has been closed an explosion killed two demolition workers for the Cuyahoga Wrecking Co., Great Neck, N.Y., which bought the property in 1986 and had been dismantling the distillery.

The two men were thrown from a scaffold Nov. 7 when a high-temperature cutting torch apparently ignited some crude oil left in a pipeline.